16 Motivation theories in psychology (Summary)

Last updated on January 13, 2025

Hanan Parvez
MA Psychology

Theories of motivation attempt to explain what motivates human behaviour, especially in the context of a workplace. Motivation theories try to explain what motivates workers in the hopes of yielding insights that can help organizations improve the productivity of their workers.

Though motivation theories largely focus on business contexts, understanding them can help you understand human motivation in any social context.

The reason behind there being so many theories of motivation is that motivation is a complex phenomenon that is dependent on numerous factors. It's difficult for researchers to come up with a unified framework that explains motivation in all its aspects.

This is true generally true for psychological concepts. The human mind is so complicated that it experiences problems when it attempts to understand itself.

Also, the fact that there are many theories of motivation doesn't mean that any of them is wrong or less important. When you go through all the motivation theories, you'll have a better grasp on what makes us tick.

1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory

One of the most widely-known theories of motivation, it arranges human needs in a hierarchy. The lower a need in the hierarchy, the more dominant it is. When a lower-level need is satisfied, the next level need emerges. The person keeps climbing up the pyramid to reach self-actualization.

Physiological needs

These include the basic needs of survival such as food, water, air, and sleep. Without these needs being met, a person's body is affected negatively and they struggle to survive. People are strongly motivated to satisfy their physiological needs.

Safety needs

These needs motivate a person to be safe and avoid life-threatening situations. Harm to a person's body can not only occur by a lack of food, air, and water but also by external threats such as accidents and natural calamities.

Financial security also comes under safety needs. Therefore, a person is likely to feel motivated in a job where their financial safety need is being met. Job security can be a powerful motivator too.

Social needs

These are needs that we fulfil via others such as the need for affection, love, and belongingness. A workplace that ensures that the social needs of employees are well taken care of can have a positive impact on motivation.

Esteem needs

Humans want self-respect and respect from others. A workplace that ensures that the workers get recognition, status, and admiration for their work can boost motivation.

Self-actualization

Lastly, people want to reach self-actualization i.e. they want to be the best they can be. That can happen only if they grow continually. Hence, growth can be a powerful motivator. Sometimes workers leave organizations because of a lack of growth. If a job provides opportunities for growth, that can be very motivating.

For further details and discussion of this theory, read this article on the different types of needs.

2. McClelland's learned needs theory

This theory states that humans learn to desire power, achievement, and affiliation from their experiences and interactions with the world around them.

Those who desire power desire to influence and control people and their surroundings. Those who're achievement-oriented set goals, take responsibility and show interest in problem-solving.

Those with affiliation needs strive for social approval, respect, and admiration of others. The need for power corresponds to Maslow's esteem needs, affiliation to social needs and achievement to self-actualization.

Thus, this theory can be seen as a modified version of Maslow's theory.

3. Alderfer's ERG theory

This is another theory that closely maps onto Maslow's theory. ERG stands for Existence, Relatedness, and Growth.

Existence needs are needs that are essential for our existence and correspond to Maslow's physiological needs.

Relatedness needs are concerned with our relationships with other people and correspond to Maslow's social needs.

Growth needs are concerned with reaching self-actualization.

4. Herzberg's two-factor theory

Herzberg talks about two factors in his theory that influence motivation. These are motivation and hygiene/maintenance factors.

The theory states that the presence of motivation factors increases job satisfaction whereas the absence of hygiene factors leads to job dissatisfaction. Also, taking care of hygiene factors doesn't necessarily lead to motivation but it's the least employers can do.

5. McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y

McGregor took a different approach while trying to explain what motivates workers. Instead of focusing on human needs like the previous theories did, he focused on the nature of workers and concluded that there are two types of workers.

Theory X says:

- Workers are not motivated on their own. They need to be motivated externally.
- Workers have no ambition or desire to work. They want to avoid working as much as they can.
- Workers are selfish and care only about their own goals, even if at the expense of organizational goals.

Theory Y says:

- Workers are self-motivated and do not need direction.
- Workers are ambitious and have an inherent desire to work.
- Workers like taking responsibility and care about organizational goals.

Of course, these are two extreme positions. The distribution of workers with respect to these traits will likely follow a normal curve with most having some combination of these traits and few being extreme X and extreme Y.

6. Theory Z

This theory was put forward by Urwick, Rangnekar and Ouchi and because it was given after Theory X and Theory Y, they called it Theory Z. They added to McGregor's theory by pointing out that organizational goals can be reached when every worker knows exactly what they are and specifically what they need to do in order to reach those goals.

If organizational goals are not clearly laid down and the role of workers in relation to those goals aren't well-defined, you cannot blame the workers for their lack of motivation.

7. Argyris's theory

This theory states that there are immature and mature individuals in an organization. Immature individuals lack self-awareness and are too reliant on others whereas mature individuals are self-aware and self-reliant.

Traditional management methods focused on the chain of command, unity of direction and span of management breed immaturity in an organization. For maturity to thrive, a shift needs to take place from a more autocratic to a more democratic style of leadership.

8. Hawthorne effect

Another approach that lays emphasis on the behaviour of management toward the workers is the Hawthorne effect. This effect came to light during a series of experiments that were designed to test the influence of physical conditions on productivity.

The researchers, wanting to find out which physical conditions influenced productivity, changed a number of physical conditions. They observed that productivity increased every time they made a change.

This led them to conclude that the increase in productivity did not happen because of the physical changes they made to the workplace. Rather, merely observing the workers led them to perform better.

This improvement in performance when you're being observed came to be known as the Hawthorne effect. It most likely stems from our need to appear good and

competent to other people.

9. Cognitive evaluation theory

This motivation theory talks about two motivation systems- intrinsic and extrinsic motivation systems.

Intrinsic motivation is derived from the actual performance of the work. An intrinsically motivated person likes their work and finds it meaningful. They derive a sense of achievement and pride from their work. They are competent and take responsibility.

An intrinsically motivated person may have good working conditions, great salary and good status in their organization but if the work itself doesn't satisfy them, they can get demotivated.

Extrinsically motivated workers, on the contrary, are motivated by external, job-unrelated factors such as working conditions, salary, promotion, status, and benefits. It doesn't matter much to them what they do and whether or not their work is meaningful.

10. Vroom's expectancy theory

This is another cognitive approach to motivation that states that if workers believe there's a relationship between the effort they put in their work and their performance outcomes, they'd be willing to put in high effort to maximize outcomes.

This motivation theory can be expressed as a formula:

Motivation = Valence x Expectancy x Instrumentality

Valence is the value placed by a worker on a particular outcome or reward. Expectancy means the worker expects their effort to lead to the valued outcome.

Instrumentality is the belief that the performance is instrumental in reaching the outcome.

The distinction between effort and performance is subtle but important. Effort basically means how much energy a worker expends while performance means what they actually do.

From the above equation, motivation will be high when valence, expectancy and instrumentality are all high. If any of these variables are low, it'll bring down the motivation level.

If any one of these variables is zero, motivation too will be zero.

For instance, if a worker doesn't value the outcome they're working toward at all i.e. valence is zero, they won't have any motivation even if they believe their effort and performance will lead to the outcome.

11. Porter and Lawler's expectancy theory

Porter and Lawler turned Vroom's brilliant theory onto its head by suggesting that motivation and effort do not directly lead to performance. Instead, performance leads to satisfaction which, in turn, leads to motivation.

Effort or the amount of energy expended is influenced by two factors- value of reward and perception of effort-reward probability. That is to say, workers will expend effort if they believe there's a good chance their efforts will lead to the desired outcome. They need not be 100% sure as in Vroom's theory.

12. Adam's Equity theory

This theory adds yet another important detail to understanding effort and motivation that Vroom, Porter and Lawler missed out on- the efforts and rewards of others.

According to this theory, motivation is not only influenced by one's effort and how likely one thinks their efforts are going to lead to rewards, but also by how others are rewarded for their efforts. These 'others' with whom a worker compares their effort and reward are called referents.

Referents have to be comparable. It makes no sense for a staff manager, for instance, to compare himself to the CEO of the company. But when the staff manager puts in the same amount of work and receives less pay than another staff manager doing the same work, it can be very demotivating for the former.

Equity theory states that the rewards given to a worker and other comparable workers should be in proportion to the effort they put in.

It's not common to hear something like this in workplaces:

"All he does is sit all day. How come he earns more than us?"

This is Adam's equity theory in action. It's in our nature to be treated justly compared to our peers.

13. Temporal theory

This is a simple theory that all of us can relate with. It states that our motivation levels increase when deadlines are near. There's even a formula that takes into account this relationship between motivation and nearness of a deadline:

Motivation = (Expectancy x Value) / (1 + Impulsiveness x Delay)

As is clear from the formula, motivation increases with an increase in our expectancy of attaining valued rewards and decreases with an increase in impulsiveness and time available before a deadline.

Impulsiveness refers to the tendency of a person to get distracted.

14. Reinforcement theory

This theory is based on the works of behaviorist B.F. Skinner who talked about something called operant conditioning. Operant conditioning can be seen as a way to motivate or demotivate someone to do something.

Operant conditioning describes the effects of the consequences of behaviour on the future occurrence of that behaviour.

A key concept in operant conditioning is reinforcement. The word 'reinforcement' always implies strengthening of behaviour.

Positive reinforcement is when you're rewarded for behaviour and this leads you to repeat the behaviour in the future.

Negative reinforcement is when you're motivated to repeat a behaviour in order to avoid something that's bothering you. For example, telling someone to shut up again and again if they're annoying you with their talk.

If you're no longer rewarded for the behaviour, it weakens and finally disappears i.e. it goes extinct. Behaviour can also be weakened and eliminated by punishment.

15. Arousal theory

Arousal theory explains what happens at the neurological level during operant conditioning. When we're rewarded for a behavior, the neurotransmitter dopamine is

released and we feel good and aroused i.e. alert and stimulated.

This pleasure and arousal motivates us to repeat the behaviour.

Reaching our goals makes us feel good and we're in a state of arousal. This motivates us to set and reach more goals.

16. Evolutionary theory

Humans, like other animals, are motivated to perform actions that enable them to survive and reproduce. Almost all our needs can be reduced to these two categories- survival and reproduction.

When motivation in the workplace is looked at from this perspective, many things become clear. People work so that they can feed themselves and attract a suitable mate. Then they pass on their genes to their offspring and continue to work so that they can invest in and raise their offspring.

The ultimate goal of human motivation is the survival of one's genes and their successful transmission to the succeeding generations.

Hanan Parvez (Author)

Hanan is the founder of PsychMechanics and holds a Master's degree in Psychology. He simplifies complex psychological ideas into actionable insights. His work has been cited by academics, therapists, and featured in *Business Insider*, *Entrepreneur*, and the *New York Post*.
Learn more →

Latest

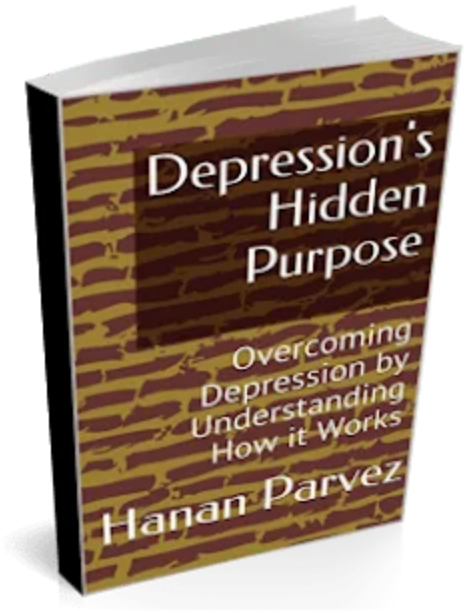
Kindness is not weakness: Why it's seen that way

Attachment styles test: Discover your style

Emotional blackmail by parents: Key tactics and examples

The psychology of older woman-younger man relationships

22 Red and green flags in relationships



Mental health disclaimer

Terms of service

Privacy policy

Contact

©2026 PsychMechanics